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Why a "Somewhat Asexual" Daryl Dixon is Not Enough: The Importance of Labels in Queer Media

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Why a "Somewhat Asexual" Daryl Dixon is Not Enough: The Importance of Labels in Queer Media

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2019

Dedication

This Report is dedicated to my life-long best friend, Jessica Ryane Cobb.

After many hours of jokes, debates, laughs, and memes, I've finally assembled some coherent thoughts.

It is also dedicated to Michael Sheen, who single-handedly funded my last semester of graduate school through GoFundMe.

Finally, it is dedicated to the asexual community; fans daily fighting through tweets, transformative works, and personal blog posts for rich, diverse representations in media; and creatives who are using their platforms to lift up minorities and share their stories respectfully.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisors, Suzanne Scott and Curran Nault, for extensive feedback, encouraging words, and extreme amounts of patience and understanding.

Thank you to Douglas Julien, Brenda Riley, LaMoya Burks, Haley Brundon, Jessica Ryane Cobb, Joe Burzynski, Leah Beall, and Kristen "Alex" Swiber for reading several bits and pieces (many of which were the same sections revised) and/or offering me guidance, encouragement, and a listening ear.

Thank you to Texas A&M University – Texarkana's Student Success Center and Ben Lindsay for making sure I had friendship, library access to work remotely as a grad student, and a job I loved when I had to return home to care for my grandmother.

Thank you to my older sister Ashley B. Waller, my parents Roger and Teresa Johnson, family friend Christopher McKinney, and the late Gary "Pops" Anderson for making it possible for me to be a student at the University of Texas at Austin through many physical means and a few miracles.

Thank you to Encompass Home Health and Encompass Hospice of Texarkana for all that you have done for me, my dad, and my grandmother after my grandmother's dementia diagnosis and need for full-time care developed. Without you, we would not have been able to continue our work, and I would not have finished this project.

Thank you to my friends in the RTF department, Peers for Pride, and others at UT-Austin for your friendship. I had been nervous to move to an entirely new city, even if it was Austin, but y'all welcomed me with open arms.

A special thank you to my precious little rescue cat, Penny Lane, for always knowing when I need a hug, even if she doesn't particularly enjoy giving them.

Thank you to Matt, Julia, Xander, and Zachary Maddox for welcoming Haley and I into your home so that we had the financial means to return to the Austin area.

A massive thank you to Michael Sheen, the *Good Omens* fandom's Twitter community, and the GoFundMe donors who encouraged me to keep going when I was so exhausted by my life as a full-time caregiver, shared my GoFundMe page, and fulfilled my fundraising goal to continue my graduate studies to completion. I would not be eligible for graduation without your thoughtfulness and funding.

Abstract

Why a "Somewhat Asexual" Daryl Dixon is Not Enough: The Importance of Labels in Queer Media

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

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This report will reveal the ways in which Daryl Dixon serves as complex asexual representation by breaking down the harmful, horror-centric stereotypes former depictions of asexuality have created; confront the lack of literature around asexuality that has created the conditions for such stereotypes to flourish; and highlight an example of the gross misunderstandings that have occurred due to this phenomenon for the purpose of challenging others to diversify their understandings of asexuality in the future. This work will be presented through the accessible, multi-media form of Prezi. Prezi is a valuable format for this discussion because it is available to anybody with internet access for free and allows many different forms of learning to co-exist. Everything from visual and textual products to auditory and interactive components of engagement work together to convey meaning in a Prezi presentation. An in-depth Prezi presentation offers more story development opportunities, creative freedoms, and the accessibility needed to create the best type of project for the intended audiences—fans, academics, and the asexual community. Though the presentation is available on Prezi through a weblink, this statement serves as a supplemental document to both describe the project and its objectives and discuss Prezi as a form for free, accessible academic argument.

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Link to Presentation

The artist's statement below is designed to contextualize and supplement the following academic presentation, created in Prezi:

bit.ly/AceDarylDixon

Introduction

Throughout my time in grad school, I struggled with a need to make my work feel purposeful. It is one thing to break down media in theoretical frameworks, but it is another thing entirely to have that work benefit society. During my first year of studies in my MA program, I felt as though I was playing with academic thought—like a magician with a well-executed card trick. I weaved webs of deconstructionist ideas and noticed fun patterns that emerged in media, but I struggled to see the ways in which these discoveries were meaningful. The trouble with deconstruction is the endless deference of meaning leaves nothing definitive, but, as a society, we use media to understand ourselves and the world around us; even if it is often unrealistic in some ways. We connect with characters and their struggles and can learn about ourselves through them. After participating in a number of queer studies courses, I considered my own experiences with queer media. I learned a lot about myself through TV depictions of queer characters, and I found self-understanding in the ways they identified. At the same time, I witnessed a friend struggle with accepting that they were asexual and noticed that media representation for this queer identity was both limited and shrouded with negative associations. Heteronormative society has often represented the asexual community through depictions of repressed, cold, unfeeling people (sometimes even murderers), and I was looking for asexual characters in media that shared one specific trait with my friend—a lack of a love interest.

I did not have to look far—my favorite show featured a main character that has never had a canon love interest. From 2010 to the present, the character of Daryl Dixon

(Norman Reedus) in the AMC series *The Walking Dead* has never been verbally associated with the term "asexuality," but he has existed as an asexual character in every season. Therefore, there exists the chance that Daryl Dixon is not an asexual figure at all, but, throughout the seasons, the character has never had a canon love interest. Without the language of asexuality to label him as an asexual figure, one can only draw assumptions about Daryl Dixon's sexuality. Oftentimes, this leads the viewer to draw assumptions based on what society considers normative. The heteronormative read (that Daryl Dixon is straight) is the most discussed one. It is a reading that exists on assumption. The assumption that Daryl Dixon is seeking a relationship at all is a normative read, but that does not mean that it supported more strongly than other readings in canon. Arguably, the lack of a love interest spanning several years of character development seems to suggest asexuality. Accordingly, Dixon has the potential to deconstruct the concept that being asexual is something negative and unfeeling by moving from a cold, repressed, unloving character to one that developed complex, purposeful connections with other characters throughout the series.

This report will reveal the ways in which Daryl Dixon serves as complex asexual representation by breaking down the harmful, horror-centric stereotypes former depictions of asexuality have created; confront the lack of literature around asexuality that has created the conditions for such stereotypes to flourish; and highlight an example of the gross misunderstandings that have occurred due to this phenomenon for the purpose of challenging others to diversity their understandings of asexuality in the future. This work will be presented through the accessible, multi-media form of Prezi. I selected

Prezi because it is freely available to anybody with internet access and allows many different forms of learning to co-exist. Everything from visual and textual pieces to auditory and interactive components of engagement work together to convey meaning in a Prezi presentation. An in-depth Prezi presentation offers more story development opportunities, creative freedoms, and the accessibility needed to create the best type of project for the intended audiences—fans, academics, and the asexual community. Often in my work, I hope to blend fannish interests, literary and/or queer theories, and purposefulness.

Though the artistic possibilities seem endless using Prezi, the most important aspect of this format is that it is accessible. Prezi is free software that requires only a weblink to be accessed by anyone with a computer, smartphone, or tablet and an internet connection. PowerPoint is part of the Microsoft Office suite which can be costly and requires one to download presentations to view them. In this way, a PowerPoint presentation might have been fine for circulating through academic communities only, but Prezi allows a broader audience to view the content of the presentation for free with little gatekeeping. Viewers need only a link to experience the presentation as free scholarship. For non-academics, like fans of *The Walking Dead* and some members of the asexual community, Prezi is accessible and easy to follow along with.

A Problem to Address

"Why a 'Somewhat Asexual' Daryl Dixon is Not Enough: The Importance of Labels in Queer Media" is a gift to a dear friend, first and foremost. My friend identifies as asexual and shared with me the grief they felt over this identity. My friend worried over being abnormal, unfeeling, and unloving, but I knew that they made me and others they cared for feel loved. These conversations about asexuality and emotionality took place in the Fall 2018 school semester and coincided with my participation in the University of Texas at Austin's Peers for Pride program—a part of my minor coursework for an MA in Media studies degree with a certificate in Women and Gender Studies focused on LGBTQ Studies. At the time, I was enrolled in the course "Confronting LGBTQ Oppression," which aimed to answer the core question of "What do thriving LGBTQA+/queer communities look like?" Throughout this course, we studied testaments of folx of all intersectional identities, and I first read Megan Milks and Karli June Cerankowski's "Introduction: Why Asexuality? Why Now?" in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (2014). In the text, Milks reiterated my friend's anxieties, stating:

> For many years, I might have described myself as asexual—had I been exposed to any kind of positive understanding of asexuality. Unaware that an asexual movement existed, I did not use the language of asexuality to describe myself, but words like "repressed," "cold," "weird," "wrong" (Milks 5).

With this resource echoing my friend's voice, I wondered why asexuality—a label signifying a disinterest in a sexual relationship—seemed attached to signifiers like

"repressed," "cold," and "wrong." Furthermore, I recognized the value of the exposure to positive representation of asexuality for someone asexual. The negative tropes associated with asexuality in other depictions, and not the label itself, had led the author to self-describe in negative terms.

A Personal Answer and a Queer Problem

To consider the question of why asexuality had such negative associations with it, I looked at my own queer identity and how I came to formulate it. I identify as transgender (sometimes shortened to the term "trans") now, but, for a long time, I did not have the language to describe how I felt. I discovered the language through transgender representation in media—first in television (through fictional series such as *Glee* [Fox, 2009-2015] and reality programming like *I Am Jazz* [TLC, 2015-Present]), but later through the Trans YouTube community. Tobias Raun's 2015 ethnographic article, "Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection Between Trans Identity and Information Technology," includes interview with several trans creators on YouTube. One creator cited, Erica, describes how watching others online tell their own, autobiographical stories led her to understand her personal history as a trans individual. Furthermore, Erica encourages trans people to continue to tell their trans stories online in their own ways. As Raun notes,

> What Erica seems to suggest is the transformative power of (re)claiming a trans identity: the vlog is not just a site for personal storytelling but also for creating, communicating, and negotiating cultural and collective stories about transsexuality (372).

Through the collective narratives created on the site, what it means to be *transgender* is discovered by many people for the first time, who see themselves reflected in the way others tell their own, personal stories of being trans. Though YouTube features this robust community of several voices writing the language of being transgender and telling

their personal stories, mainstream media must tell these stories to normalize them. Those that have the most visibility should uplift the voices of those that have less visibility. LGBTQ representation should not be viewed as a niche interest, but as a depiction of the diversity that already exists in society.

Though my personal history has taught me one way in which queer media is vital to our society, queer representation in media matters for many reasons. According to Kylo-Patrick R. Hart in "Introduction: Media Representation and Sensitive Subjects" (2016),

> Like other kinds of subject matter that have at one time or another been culturally regarded as controversial or taboo, regular exposure to a range of boundary-pushing televisual representations of queerness in its various forms can result in this historically sensitive subject matter becoming easier for audience members to encounter, accept, and no longer feel threatened by (Hart 6).

Hart's statement reveals that queer people need to see themselves represented in media just as anyone else does, but the heteronormative world needs queer representation, too.

Hart is among several scholars that have critically considered the ways in which media has either carefully calculated diverse representations to support the status quo or neglected depicting some identities altogether, despite the value of representation for marginalized groups. In his foundational 1995 text, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Post-Modern*, Douglas Kellner argued that cultural studies should critically consider how media can enact social change and be used for activism by creating space for those many voices of diverse identities that are

silenced by marginalization (336-337). Herman Gray has also tracked representational media (particularly regarding race) and the academic conversations surrounding the topic for decades, emphasizing the ideological support for heteronormative society through curated representations (1989), the carefully constructed discourse on diversity in media representations that both showcases diverse populations and downplays them so the stories are more acceptable to dominant hegemonic group viewers (2001), and the lack of genuine concern for minorities that comes from a culture of striving for the most accurate and "real" representations instead of mobilizing the concerns and goals of historically underrepresented communities through creating space and making their own voices heard (2013).

Some of Gray's sentiments are shared by those in the field of queer studies as well. Alexander Doty reiterated the concept of a palatable form of liberal diversity and revealed that it really is not what It claims to be at all. In "*Modern Family, Glee,* and the Limits of Television Liberalism" (2010), Doty clarified:

> [T]hese characters are "good" gays who keep their "place at the table" by striving to be just like their straight middle class counterparts, living in a monogamous relationship and building up a (mildly dysfunctional) family with children, a stay-at-home "mom" and a working "dad" (Doty).

Doty's piece reveals that, often, "diverse media representation" is only depicting a very narrow perspective of diversity—one that is not very diverse. It works in tandem with Gray's analysis that these forms of diversity are carefully constructed to be the most acceptable versions for heteronormative society. Tackling "media representation" has

gone from acknowledging a problem that creators did not care to address to building a carefully constructed image of a non-diverse form of diversity—this type of diversity lacks any genuine meaning, but it also lacks empathy and concern for those identities it claims to represent.

In our heteronormative society, non-heteronormative folx deserve media representation they can actually identify with that is handled with care in its presentation, but not all identities have been acknowledged very much in the first place—in media or in academic discussion. In the introduction for *Television and the Self: Knowledge, Identity, and Media Representation* (2013), Kathleen M. Ryan and Deborah A. Macey point out that "television reflects our reality and helps us sort out what it means to be a twenty-first century man or woman" (Ryan & Macey 11). However, this statement, as well as the collection itself, fails to address some non-heteronormative identities. According to the aforementioned quote, they address men and women in the book, but they do not acknowledge those who identify by labels outside of the gender binary. Arguably, Doty's 1993 text, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, wrestled with the lack of representation for queer identities in the way "queer" as a term was (and still is for some queer identities) used. Doty clarified his desired meaning of the word, stating:

> ["Queer"] includes specifically gay, lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but it also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) nonstraight positions…queerness can also be about the intersecting or combining of more than one specific form of nonstraight sexuality (*xvi*).

Doty's version of "queer" is inclusive of labels beyond "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual." He includes all identities that are non-straight positions—even those he claims are "unclassifiable." In 2019, there is a plethora of non-straight identities to consider, but media representation is most-often defined by those identities most visible and acceptable to the dominant hegemonic discourse. The heteronormative world usually still views "queer" as a term meaning "gays and lesbians." Terms like, "pansexual," "greysexual," "demisexual," and "asexual" are still not commonly known or understood, in part because there are not visible representations of them in media.

The problem with diverse representation is two-fold: there is often little to no representations for parts of the groups supposedly represented and the representation available is mostly *mis*representation. Through my research, I discovered the ways in which heteronormative storytellers have addressed queer identities historically and how they continue to (mis)represent asexuality in media. However, this conversation tended to appear within journalistic sources, and I found it difficult to find this topic discussed in academic sources much—even within queer studies. When it comes to asexuality, academia has failed to uphold the principles of intersectionality and create space for those identities that are often silenced in society.

A Space with Purpose

By design, this project presents the voices of the asexual community through both journalistic and academic sources. It features these voices because I desire to be a queer academic using my privilege as a tool for uplifting the voices of others, such as those of the asexual community. The bibliography reflects the struggle to find academic discussions of asexuality that I experienced during this project, but it also celebrates the mainstream attention given to the subject. A quick search in the *Lexis Uni* database reveals that the phrase "asexual representation in media" begins to pop up every now and then around 2012 and has continued to climb steadily in use since. *Lexis Uni* has 15 articles from 2012 in its database, but there are 186 results for those published in 2019. One academic source that directly discusses asexuality featured in the project is the aforementioned Milks and Cerankowski's "Introduction: Why Asexuality, Why Now?." The piece itself (and the book it introduces) serves as a call for academia to begin the conversation around asexuality as a field of study (Milks & Cerankowski). In addition, the voices of asexual journalists are featured, revealing why meaningful asexual representation matters. In the evocative *Bustle* article written in 2018 titled "Todd's Asexuality On 'Bojack Horseman' Isn't A Perfect Depiction, But It's Made Me Feel Understood," Julie Kliegman contends, "[A] sustained, sensitive story arc involving a main character is a huge breakthrough for asexual viewers; it was also the catalyst for my own coming out" (Kliegman).

Kliegman's quote is describing a long-awaited victory of the asexual community.

These harmful stereotypes that have plagued asexuality in media and have been written by privileged people who were not interested in representing asexuality in the way asexuals see themselves are not erased by *Bojack Horseman*, but they must share space with a richer form of asexuality thanks to the show. Harry Benshoff's 1998 work, "The Monster and the Homosexual," described the predicament of gay and lesbian representations in the past. Selected statements from the piece are applicable to asexual individuals as well, such as, "Queer suggests death over life by focusing on non-procreative sexual behaviors" (Benshoff 5). When considering misrepresentation of the queer community, Benshoff's work tells a *horrific* tale—illustrating the connections between horror and gay/lesbian stereotypes. The argument does not seem to hold up in 2019 for gay and lesbian tropes usually, but gays and lesbians have more space in mainstream media now. They have shifted from horror figures to heteronormative-coded characters according to Doty's analysis, so there is nothing to fear in this form of queer representation.

Oftentimes, asexuality in television and film is character trait in horror content. In a piece of videographic criticism found on YouTube, luvtheheaven5 reveals the relationship between asexual representation and Benshoff's critiques of homosexual representation in "Asexuality & Aromanticism; Celibacy & Nonamory – Television Representation (Unpacking the Problems)." Published to YouTube in 2018, the work analyzes characters from several TV shows including: Sherlock from BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-2017), Dexter from Showtime & CBS's *Dexter* (2006-2013),

Voodoo from USA's *Sirens* (2014-2015) and James from UK station, Channel 4's *The End of the F***ing World* (2017-present) among others. Though not all these characters are within horror-genre stories, none can escape the associations with monster-figure tropes--whether through dark jokes (like the nickname "Voodoo"), repressed, antisocial savants (such as Sherlock), or actual quotes like "I thought she could be interesting to kill" (*The End of the F***ing World*). Though luvtheheaven5 points out that not all of these characters are confirmed to be asexual, they all share asexual characteristics at some point or are associated with the label by other characters making the connection (luvtheheaven5).

TheWonderGinger's 2018 video essay found on YouTube, "AsexualRepScratch," discusses asexual erasure through the example of an *Archie Comics* character that is in a heterosexual romantic relationship in the CW's show *Riverdale*. The history of the Archie Comics *Riverdale* books in which Jughead Jones is a confirmed asexual in *Jughead* No. 4 is presented followed by the television depiction of the character in The CW's *Riverdale*. TheWonderGinger showcases that they did not just remove references to Jughead Jones as an asexual character for the television adaptation; they completely contradicted this trait. Unlike the example in this work of Daryl Dixon in AMC's *The Walking Dead*, who is not labeled asexual but has never entered into a relationship with another character, Jughead Jones is explicitly and actively heterosexual in *Riverdale*. The video essay cycles through many scenes in which Jughead is intimate with Betty Cooper in the TV show. In this example, asexual representation is something

that The CW deliberately chose to remove, actively silencing the voices of the asexual community and failing to serve society by providing an example of this often-hidden identity with which some people may identify (TheWonderGinger).

A Purposeful Platform

In selecting the correct tool through which I could craft and distribute this project, I found myself desiring to create a more structurally complex work that allowed viewers to linger in the moment with components of the discussion, view several types of sources side-by-side, and independently shift through sections actively and artistically. Prezi's presentation format provides the user with a blank template and few limits which can function as a strengthening agent for the argument; in this project, slide 49, labeled "Example: Rick/Daryl Dynamic & Group Relations" acts as an outline for the following slides with slides 50-54 all containing different pieces of the example. Slide 49 stands out in the larger project as a whole because it is one of only slides missing the signature ace bubble outline. By creating a visual difference to this group of slides, I hope to convey that this section is transitioning from argument to example even without having stated it. The platform also has the potential to wed academia and artistry, allowing for both deep, academic discussion and artistic expression, as opposed to PowerPoint, Keynote, or, in some ways, video criticism, which are much more linear and limited formats. In this Prezi, I created an asexual pride/Daryl Dixon background that serves as a bulletin board for the argument as a whole, and the viewer traverses through each section and its pieces with visual aids and intentional movements meant to tell the story in an artistic way while incorporating the academic voices and intellectual narration that complete that story. At the same time, Prezi appealed to me because of its accessibility and shareability. The work is meant for fans, academics, and those that identify as asexual to all have a

meaningful discussion about creating space for asexual characters and the discussion of asexuality as a valid identity; therefore, the project should be accessible to all types of audiences and shareable with anyone.

This accessibility is two-fold. On the one hand, the diverse ways in which information is conveyed (via text, images, graphics, and video clips) will engage many learners of different learning styles. Auditory and visual learners are provided with text to read, pictures to view, and videos to watch and listen to; while kinesthetic learners can actively move through the slides and interact with the presentation. Prezi is also accessible in the tangible ability to share presentations in entirety through social media websites, emails, and in-person lectures. Furthermore, the content is free to anyone who can access the website from a computer, tablet, or smartphone.

One artistic component that creates a memorable link between the media object and academic thought that is featured in this work utilizes Prezi's unique zoom function. In Nora Strasser's article, "Using Prezi in Higher Education," she states, "[Prezi's zoom] creates a movement that can emphasize important concepts and connections" (Strasser 96). In the first in a series of a few slides, poor examples of asexual representation surround a video describing those examples. One example viewers can consider is the image of BBC's Sherlock with the word "Alone" covering his eyes in a scratchy, black banner alongside luvtheheaven5's video describing him and the other characters as horror-figures. As the viewer exits this video, the slide shifts and zooms into the eye of a skull sticker I found within Prezi's clip art feature. Travelling through the eye of the skull

metaphorically reminds the viewer that this piece of the argument is a discussion underneath the surface, embedded deep within the way asexuality has been represented for years. The viewer is then presented with four quotes in simple, individual slides, each brought to focus so they hold their own, individual space. The quotes are from Benshoff's "Monster and the Homosexual" piece, and each quote applies to the horror-figure depictions of asexual characters, with or without the explicit association with the term "asexual." In his 2015 article, "Educating with Prezi: A New Presentation Paradigm for Teaching, Learning, and Leading in the Digital Age," Ammar H. Safar noted, "With Prezi's smart 'Zooming' function, you are able to focus in closely for particular details and then move out to provide a wider angle view. This is how you are capable of displaying the big picture and the details" (Safar 496). The example discussed above in my presentation reveals that Safar's observation can also work in reverse: one can start with a bigger picture concept and then zoom in to focus on underlying themes as well.

While the artistic limits of Prezi's blank canvas nature are wonderfully ineffable, the format boasts quite a large number of supported media formats with which many clever collages are made. In this Prezi project, I have used JPG picture files, videos, text boxes, movement, a custom backdrop, circular slides, invisible box slides for making the most of the zoom feature, clip art, transparent PNG images, word bubbles, and custom slides made from clip art. Safar describes this resourceful technology as "story-driven," which makes it ideal for creating stand-alone discussions that do not need a presenter. He writes, "Prezi helps you engage your audience with superior, creative, innovative, and

ultra-compelling storytelling presentations. It provides something that other presentation applications do not, non-linear dynamic movement" (Safar 495). With this project, my objective is to tell a story that is often untold, and Prezi allows that story to be told in many different types of communication simultaneously.

While the artistic and story-driven components of Prezi make it a wonderful format for academic discussion, the most intriguing factor when considering the reception of this presentation is in Prezi's accessibility. The audiences I hope to reach with this topic do not always overlap. Not all fan conventions are full of queer scholars in LGBTQ+ panels, there are not many asexual meet-ups at academic conferences, and fans and asexual folx are not likely perusing the latest issue of *The Journal of Popular Culture*. However, each of these groups holds a fair amount of space on the internet, and Prezi allows presentations to be circulated through any different means. Safar explains that Prezi allows one to share their work in a variety of different shareable forms. Prezi's can be shared in a public domain, sent to people with an emailed weblink, embedded on webpages, published to social media sites and blogs, added to Prezi's own database, saved as a PDF, and more (Safar 496). Furthermore, Strasser mentions that any edits made to a Prezi will update automatically, and the links will reflect the modified works. Prezis are stored on the website and can be modified at any point, and the new modifications will be available through any of the aforementioned modes of presentation that exist in Prezi's cloud (Strasser 96). This function creates the potential for this project to grow and evolve as the conversation continues and more and more representations are

created. Texts are written, printed/published, and done; Prezis are only done if the creator stops editing them.

Conclusion

In 1995, Kellner challenged the field of cultural studies to primarily discuss the way media should provide a space for marginalized communities and serve as a site of activism. The objectives are to make the invisible seen, the unknown familiar, and the silenced voices ring out; as well as point out the injustices done against marginalized groups in the past. Hopefully, this project serves as a piece doing the work to uplift a marginalized community, recognize the harm that has been done by stereotypical media representations in the past, and challenge those creators to make space in their media works for silenced communities instead of being the silencing force. Furthermore, I hope the accessibility of this project helps to bridge the gaps between the queer community, fans, and academics--creating a conversation about diversity featuring diverse voices. Queer artist, blogger, and entertainer Alok Vaid-Menon expressed, "[A]rtists have the ability to create and practice the type of world we are fighting for with our craft" (T*he Shorty Awards*) reminding us that the works of creatives have the potential to change what we consider normative society. Be they academics, scriptwriters, bloggers, or others, it is vital to keep the conversations of change alive, document personal experiences that simply say, “I am,” and echo those voices whispering in spaces where we are heard.

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Vita

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This report was typed by the author.